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ABSTRACT

Attributions, attempts to link an event with its causes, enable people to understand and react to their surroundings. Because attributions are directly related to understanding events, and because this understanding influences how individuals then deal with events, attributions play a vital role in the coping process. To explore the nature of religious attributions, undergraduate students, who ranged in age from 17 to 43, participated in this study to partially fulfill research-participation requirements for an introductory psychology class. Subjects (N=96) were interviewed about their attributions for the event, including perceptions of fairness, the friend's responsibility, God's involvement, and type of God's involvement (loving, purposeful, angry). Correlational analyses revealed important relationships among these variables (e.g., a strong positive association between intrinsic religiousness and attributions to God, a negative relationship between friend's responsibility and God's involvement). Qualitative analysis of the responses given by interviewees of God's reasons for bringing about the death fell into these categories: (1) for benefit of the deceased, for example, to make the deceased happier or to give them a rest; (2) for benefit of the survivors, for example, to make those remaining more aware that such things happen and that they must enjoy life now; (3) something worse would have happened; and (4) punishment, for example, for drinking and driving, using drugs, acting irresponsibly, and causing parents pain. (ABL)

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Personal Responsibility versus God's Will: Religious and Non-religious Attributions for the Death of a Friend

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Abstract

To explore the nature of religious attributions, 96 undergraduates dealing with the recent death of a friend were interviewed about their attributions for the event, including perceptions of fairness, the friend's responsibility, God's involvement, and type of God's involvement (loving, purposeful, and angry). Correlational analyses revealed important relationships among these variables, (e.g., a strong positive association between intrinsic religiousness and attributions to God, a negative relationship between friend's responsibility and God's involvement). Categories of religious attributions included faith, benefits to the deceased (e.g., ending suffering) and to survivors (e.g., teaching a lesson), preventing something worse from happening, and punishment.

Attributions, attempts to link an event with its causes, enable people to understand and react to their surroundings (Ross & Fletcher, 1985). Because attributions are directly related to understanding events, and because this understanding influences how individuals then deal with events, attributions play a vital role in the coping process. A key role for the psychology of religion is to understand religious attributions and how they help people cope with life (Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985) Exploring the nature of religious and non-religious attributions is, therefore, important in furthering our understanding of both the psychology of religion (e.g., Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985) and the coping process (e.g., Downey, Silver, & Wortman, 1990).

A few studies have begun to explore dimensions of religious attributions, although much remains to be learned. For example, Gorsuch and Smith (1983) found that perceptions of the actor's responsibility for the event and fairness of the outcome were determinants of the types of attributions made. Pargament and Hahn (1986) found that attributions to God were more likely in situations that were unjust (where event outcome did not follow from the actions of the individual). Further, they found different types of God attributions for the different situations (e.g., attributions to God's will, God's love, and God's anger were greater in unjust, positive outcome, and negative outcome situations, respectively.) The present study examined the subjects' perceptions of the fairness of the death, and predicted that when the death was perceived as unfair, religious attributions

would be more likely and, further, would be more to an angry God or to God's will than to God's love. Perceptions that the death was unfair were also expected to be associated with fewer attributions of responsibility of the friend.

An individual's religiousness might also influence whether religious attributions will be made. This study measured intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of religiousness (Donahue, 1985). Several studies have suggested that those with an intrinsic orientation are more likely to turn to religion in times of crisis (e.g., Park, Cohen, & Herb, 1990) and that an extrinsic orientation is associated with attributions to a punishing God (Reilly & Falgout, 1988).

The current study expected intrinsic religiousness to be associated with more religious attributions, especially to a loving God or to a purposeful God working towards a greater good. Extrinsic religiousness was expected to be less strongly associated with a religious outlook as a framework of meaning. To the extent that extrinsic religiousness was associated with religious attributions, they were expected to be more to an angry God.

In summary, the present study explored the relationships between intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness, perceived unfairness of the event, perceived responsibility of the friend for bringing about the death, degree of God's involvement, and the extent to which this involvement was out of anger, out of love, and out of purpose.

Additionally, the interview design of this study allowed an

exploration of the qualitative nature of religious attributions. For example, when people report that the death was due to God's will, what are their ideas about what this purpose might specifically be?

Method

Subjects

As part of a larger study of religious coping, individuals who had recently experienced the death of a friend were interviewed about how they dealt with this death. These subjects were 96 undergraduates (26 males (27%), 70 females (73%), 44 Catholics (46%), and 52 Protestants (54%)). Their ages ranged from 17 to 43 years (M = 19.56, SD = 3.50). These subjects participated in the study to partially fulfill research-participation requirements for an introductory psychology class.

Procedure

A screening measure of experienced events was group-administered to the entire psychology class at the beginning of the semester for three consecutive semesters. This measure asked subjects if they had experienced the death of a friend within the past year. If so, they were asked to rate the level of closeness to this friend on a 7-point scale, where 1 = not at all close and 7 = extremely close. Individuals were also asked to report their religious affiliation.

Individuals reporting the death of a friend, who rated the closeness as a 4 or above were scheduled for an individual interview with the author according to subject pool procedures.

Interview

All interviews were conducted by the investigator. Questions were posed using the standard wording and order of the interview protocol. The focus of the study was explained, and the subject was told that the interview would consist of verbal questioning, rating scales, and questionnaires. The interviewer acknowledged the potential difficulties the subject might experience when discussing the material, and the option of stopping if the subject experienced too much distress was made clear. No subject elected to stop the interview.

The interview questions relevant to this study included asking the subjects to rate their perceptions of the unfairness of their friend's death, the responsibility of the friend for bringing about the death, and the degree that God was involved in the occurrence of the death. If the subject reported that God was involved in the death, he or she was asked to rate the extent that the involvement was of an angry God, a loving God, and a purposeful God (after Pargament & Hahn, 1986). Rating scales used throughout the interview were printed on cards with the numbers 1 through 7, along with the meaning anchors, so that the subject could simply look at the card and select the number closest to how he or she felt for each question. Following the formal ratings, the interviewer reviewed answers to the religious attribution questions with each subject. Individuals were asked whether they had any further thoughts about their attributions to an angry, a loving, and a purposeful God, and were asked to elaborate on their answers if

they could.

A random half of the subjects completed the Religious Orientation Questionnaire (Feagin, 1964) prior to the interview. The remaining half of the subjects completed questionnaires at the end of the interview, to check for potential influences of the placement of the questionnaires on the content of the interview.

Measures

Intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness were assessed using Feagin's (1964) measures which are comprised of 6 items each scored on 5-point scales. These scales, whose items were on the original Religious Orientation Scale (Allport & Ross, 1967), have been found to have reasonably good psychometric properties (e.g., reliability and construct validity; see Donahue, 1985).

Reliability of these religiosity measures for the current sample was determined by computing Cronbach's alphas for intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness; results were .84 and .65, respectively.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive data revealed that participants made a high degree of religious attributions in this study: Most people (80%) saw God as at least slightly involved, and nearly 60% saw God as at least moderately involved.

Insert Table 1 here

Correlational analyses revealed that the friend's responsibility and God's involvement were only moderately negatively related. Apparently, although some people see causality as either natural or divine, many do not see human responsibility and God's involvement as mutually exclusive, but rather believe in a shared responsibility for events. Further, the perceived unfairness of the event was negatively associated with the friend's responsibility for the death and unfairness was slightly negatively correlated with God's involvement: The more the death was perceived as fair, the more the friend was seen as responsible for bringing the death about, and the less God was seen as involved.

Intrinsic religiousness was strongly associated with God's involvement and with both loving God and purposeful God attributions, and God involvement, loving, and purposeful God attributions were strongly positively related to each other. These correlations are consistent with the interview data: When describing their beliefs about God's involvement, subjects seemed to have difficulty keeping loving and purposeful motives distinct.

Of the 75 people who felt that God was involved, 15 were unable to be more specific, but felt God must have had a purpose, taking His involvement on faith. The remaining 60 people generated 72 responses or reasons (several gave more than one.) Qualitative analysis of the responses given by interviewees of God's reasons for bringing about the death fell into five major categories:

1. <u>For benefit of the deceased</u>, including to make the deceased happier or to give them a rest (5), to ease their

suffering (5), to be with their family and friends (3), to be in Heaven or a better place (8), and because they had reached perfection or fulfilled their earthly mission (2).

2. For benefit of the survivors, including to make those remaining more aware that such things happen and that they must enjoy life now (4), to help those left on earth (2), to teach survivors about alcohol abuse, drinking and driving (6), to teach people that their cruelty can hurt others (1), to bring a family closer and more involved with one another (6), to help survivors grow, become stronger, or grow up (7), to teach survivors a lesson about how they should behave (4), to teach survivors how senseless terrorism is (1), and to learn how to deal with death (1).

3. Something worse would have happened, (10). For example, "He might have made it around the corner, hit someone else and killed him.", "To prevent him from suffering in life after his injury."

4. Punishment, including for drinking and driving (2), for using drugs (2), for acting irresponsibly (1), and for causing parents pain (1).

Overall, this study demonstrated that individuals dealing with an aversive event made a great deal of religious attributions, that intrinsic religiousness was positively associated with amount of religious attributions made, that these attributions were mostly to God's love or God's will, and that the distinction between a loving

God and a purposeful God may not be accurately reflective of actual attribution processes. Additionally, perceived unfairness was negatively related to perceived responsibility of the friend, but only slightly to religious attributions.

Importantly, in addition to measuring degree of causality assigned, this study assessed the substance of religious attributions, attempting to explore more specifically what people's religious attributions consist of, and how people think of this divine involvement. The categories established should be further refined in future studies. Eventually, such research will have important implications for understanding both religious attributional processes and the roles they play in coping and adjustment.

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Table 1

Correlations Among Religious and Attributional Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Intrinsic Religiousness							
2. Extrinsic Religiousness	.49**						
3. Perceived Unfairness	-.04	-.04					
4. Perceived Responsibility	-.12	-.18*	-.27**				
5. Degree of God's Involvement	.39**	.13	.13#	-.24*			
6. Involvement of an Angry God	-.02	.11	-.03	.11	.14#		
7. Involvement of a Loving God	.32**	.15#	.03	-.17#	.65**	-.02	
8. Involvement of a Purposeful God	.45**	.20*	-.01	-.01	.70**	.17#	.67**

**p < .01 *p < .05 #p < .10